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ABSTRACT

The literature of the "foundations of education" field (e.g. social, philosophic, psychological) is examined to provide a better understanding of the relationship between schooling and culture as it applies to mildly learning disabled students. A "radical paradigm" is applied which sees schools as serving the interests of elites, as reinforcing existing inequalities, and as producing attitudes that foster acceptance of this staus quo. The position taken is that the result segregating mildly handicapped children, who tend to be "resistors" and underachievers is a form of social control. (DB)

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FOUNDATIONS OF EDUCATION AND THE MILDLY LEARNING DISABLED: TOWARD A NEW UNDERSTANDING

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ABSTRACT

The main intent here is to deliberately expand the explanation of why students are considered learning disabled. Although the main focus is formally on mildly learning disabled students, the categories of mild mental retardation and emotional disturbance are discussed as well. The foundations of education literature, e.g., social, philosophic, etc., can help provide a better understanding of the relationship between schooling and culture. With the new, radical perspective--radical connotes root or basic elements--that has recently emerged from the foundations field, an even wider vision of schooling is possible through radical analysis of cultural transmission. The development and method of this new root perspective are discussed. Only infrequently have learning disabilities (LD) or special education been viewed from a radical perspective. An example of the new perspective applied to special education is given. The position taken here is that LD--conceived originally to indicate difficulty learning due to neurologic dysfunction--has become a means for instituting a form of social control.

FOUNDATIONS OF EDUCATION AND THE MILDLY LEARNING DISABLED: TOWARD A NEW UNDERSTANDING

OVERVIEW

It is extraordinary that a notion so diffuse as "learning disability" (LD) has become the major focus of contemporary special education in so relatively short a period of time. LD, as recently conventionally defined by the U.S. government, is an amalgam of any number of dysfunctional psychological processes within an individual. The current interest in LD brought special education together in many ways, and simultaneously divided it. It might not be too strong an analogy to suggest that what organized religion did to humanity as a whole, LD has done to special education of late. Obviously, the support of a position such as this requires an argument different from the functional or empirical approach generally found within the social and behavioral sciences. The functional paradigm too much justifies the status quo while the quantitative empirical method provides little real understanding of larger social phenomena. Therefore, we must step out of the more common modes of inquiry and, in a sense, look at the historical, social, and psychological foundations of LD to understand this phenomenon in a new way.

Certain premises must be spelled out before proceeding. The position taken here is that serious learning disabilities in small numbers do exist and require special attention. Therefore, their study is essential and can be used to help children learn. The problem arises, however, when the existence of a supposed psychologically based mild dysfunctional cognitive learning style or syndrome is transformed into a rationale for an educational and institutional arrangement. With this arrangement (i.e., special education schooling) established, very serious social and ethical questions arise, such as: Who should be placed within this sort of track?

How is this to be determined? Will those placed there derive more educational benefit than if they remained in a regular educational program and how can we know this? It is one thing to study a medical syndrome or personality style, it is yet quite another to set aside or make special educational arrangements for the individual student with a mild learning problem. (In short, special education policies for the learning disabled involve us in the tension and arguments that exist between what is, what could be, and what ought to be.) When we look at arrangements made to accommodate today's almost two-million classified LD students (United States Office of Special Education, 1987), we must understand that these arrangements are not neutral or logical consequences of research but rather as efforts to institutionalize a social process. The latter point is of major concern here.

Earlier intense debates on special education have focused on those children classified as mildly or educable mentally retarded (EMR). Learning disability is actually the newest key category in special education, and we are now confronted with a major controversy regarding it related to the questions raised above.

The purpose here is to provide a brief introduction to the "foundations of education," but mainly to show the new direction this field has taken--and relate it to special education. This new direction, the root or "radical perspective," can help us to better understand the relationship of educational practices to the culture at large. After explaining the intent as well as the means of applying this new perspective, an example will be shown of its use with special education.

FOUNDATIONS OF EDUCATION AND THE NEW METHOD

Many professionals involved in psychology and learning disabilities know very little, if anything, about the work from a field known as the "foundations of education." The foundations of education field subsumes the areas of sociology

of, philosophy of, history of, economics of, and anthropology of education in addition to curriculum development and teaching methodology. For further clarification, these subdisciplines, listed above, are in many American universities located within a foundations department of a college of education. The ideas from the foundations field find expression in such professional journals as Educational Studies, Educational Theory, Journal of Curriculum Studies, Harvard Educational Review, Journal of Education, etc. The foundations field ties together, in a sense, the humanities with social science and actual educational practice, and when seen in this light, we are actually dealing with what is known as educational theory.

In as much as the foundations of education relate to culture, knowledge of foundations work can offer greater insight into educational problems. In this way we are provided with a wider vision of schooling. This is especially true since a relatively recent outlook in the foundations field has pointed to a new direction for the study of schooling.

Earlier work in foundations, as in other fields, followed basically a functional oriented paradigm which--according to a liberal writer--stresses:

> the positive . . . essential functions of schooling in an increasingly complex and meritocratic society. Schools teach cognitive skills and cosmopolitan values in attitudes; they represent an essentially rational way of sorting and selecting talent in a society that more and more demands competence and expertise for the effective performance of occupational roles. (Hurn, 1978, p. 53)

The functional research paradigm underlies both the liberal and conservative social philosophies. The liberals believe that education is the means to reforming and improving society, and that this is a slow but beneficial process. They also believe much public (or governmental) spending should go into doing this (Gill, 1980). The conservatives, on the other hand, view education as the

means to preserve existing social arrangements, but want as few government funds as possible spent in support of free public education (Brann, 1979).

It is the "radical paradigm" which "sees schools as serving the interests of elites, as reinforcing existing inequalities, and as producing attitudes that foster acceptance of this status quo" (Hurn, 1978, p. 44). This radical perspective, therefore, presents another view of the history and practice of education. The cornerstone of this radical critique is generally considered to be a book from England edited by Michael F. D. Young (1971) entitled Knowledge and Control: New Directions for the Sociology of Education.

The "new" sociology of education differed from the earlier sociological "functionalism" in that it did not justify existing social doctrine and practices. Knowledge had generally been viewed as being neutral, while the enterprise of education was usually often seen only as a benevolent service provided by society and the means for upward social mobility. Schooling is scrutinized differently now. Knowledge came to be viewed as a possible ideological tool to perpetuate existing cultural institutions and social relationships. When seen this way, the use of certain knowledge constitutes a "formal curriculum" which can mask a "hidden curriculum" (Giroux, 1981; Harris, 1979).

Shortly after the publication of Knowledge and Control, books by other new sociologists of education (Karabel & Halsey, 1977; Levitas, 1974; Sarup, 1978), radical philosophers of education (Apple, 1979; Harris, 1979), radical economists of education (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Sharp, 1980; Willis, 1977), and also from a radical anthropologist of education (Giroux, 1981) appeared. These volumes directly or indirectly built upon the new radical educational theory, and produced a serious, extensive body of modern literature about educational processes and cultural transmission. At the core of this new line of thought is the re-

lationship of ideology plus social philosophy to the politico-economic system and the role played by education within it. In some of the more recent of these publications, there is criticism about a straight forward conception whereby the means of economic production, conservative curricula and/or teaching methods yield a corresponding reproduction of consciousness. The most sophisticated radical thought on education now also considers resistance theory (Giroux, 1983a, 1983b) in addition to the straight forward reproduction notion of consciousness.

All radical analysis focuses on the underlying cultural elements of educational processes. As such, culture is the background from which certain schooling configurations can be studied. The problem, however, is that too much so in the past the dialectical or interactive relationship between the cultural ground and educational figures has been ignored, which must naturally yield a false dichotomy. The same has been said, in various ways, about psychological theories and practices as they do not often enough relate to social realities (Fromm, 1955; Nahem, 1981; among many others).

For clarification, radical analysis is somewhat related in method to "dialectical psychology" (Buss, 1979; Riegel, 1979) and psychological interactionism (Endler & Magnusson, 1976; Pervin & Lewis, 1978; Sigmon, 1984a, 1984b) because of its stress on development and reciprocal environmental presses. Until very recently, manuscripts written from the radical perspective have had difficulty gaining acceptance in conventional psychology and education journals because the method was viewed as foreign; conclusions drawn from a radical analysis have often gone against the grain of current practice, which threatened the status quo; and it was really only quite recently that those concerned with special education issues have turned to it seriously, and then only in small

numbers.

FOUNDATIONS FOR RADICAL ANALYSIS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

Because culture entails active antagonistic relations, power struggles take place within that affect the implementation of education. These struggles pit, in combination, various social class, ideological, gender, racial, religious, and ethnic groupings against each other. For example, it took a relatively long time in the history of the United States before mass free public compulsory schooling was established. The reason it took so long to pass compulsory schooling law was due not only to racist factors, but also to social class conflict because of "the refusal of well-to-do citizens to pay taxes for the education of the poor" (Rippa, 1980, p. 70). The affluent eventually grew to believe that some education for the masses was in their best interests, but the real impetus for compulsory schooling was that schools were assigned the task of Americanizing great waves of Eastern and Southern European immigrants around 1900 (Hoffman, 1974).

There has really been very little deliberate radical analysis of special education done to date. Work by Shapiro (1980) and Tomlinson (1982) were among the first. An article by Shapiro, which is clearly a radical analysis of special education, appeared in a journal whose major audience is philosophers of education, while a more lengthy radical critique of special education by a sociologist of education was brought out in book format in the UK (Tomlinson)--neither have been widely disseminated within the American special education community. Tomlinson's thesis is that special educational curriculum--as with any type of education--is related to knowledge and power. Shapiro's "crossover" article is quite important because he is a radical philosopher of education concerned with problems in special education. He helps us to see well the connection of education

to culture and how special education ties in.

> Education, as a part of the cultural "superstructure," is fundamentally a dependent institution. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to exclude it entirely from the process of social change. In reflecting the wider ideology, it contains the parameters of choice, the possibilities of change, and the definitions of reality that shape the demands, expectations, and perceptions of individuals. In this respect, education becomes, at times, the focus for the expression of tensions and conflicts arising out of our wider social experience. The attempt at reform, in special education, or in other areas of the field, becomes the attempt to resolve issues arising not simply out of education itself, but out of the broader social domain. (p. 223)

Shapiro, in essence, was not optimistic about worthwhile change in education, regular or special, unless society, the superstructure, changes. This is the basic orthodox radical position.

Although Shapiro (1980) is correct regarding the powerful influence of the existing social superstructure on (special) educational problems, we cannot merely wait until a humane transformation of society occurs before we examine educational microprocesses. This was really the thrust of Young's (1971) work. We cannot ignore the seemingly smaller areas of (special) educational practices because they can have a significant ultimate social impact. For example, the formal American special education population has increased by almost 2/3 of a million in the nine years between 1977 and 1986 (U.S. Office of Special Education, 1987). The institutionalized cultural practice of placing tens of thousands of additional children into special education annually cannot be taken lightly.

RAMIFICATIONS FOR THE MILDLY LEARNING DISABLED

There are three basic models for educating the handicapped: special residential and day schools, special classes in regular schools, and partial special educational programming combined with regular classes which is known as "mainstreaming." It is best to meet all of an exceptional child's needs, but this

must be done with as little stigmatization, labeling, and segregation as possible. (Obviously, the more handicapped the child, the more restrictive must be the educational setting.) Although most of today's 4-million plus formally labeled "handicapped" children in America (U.S. Dept. of Education, 1987) have only a "mild impairment" (Comptroller General of the United States, 1981), this group is nonetheless subject to special segregation through all the models other than residential. Yet, evidence continues to accumulate indicating that these mildly handicapped youngsters are, more often than not, "resisters" (Giroux, 1983a, 1983b; Sigmon, 1985) and underachievers (Epps, McGue, & Ysseldyke, 1982; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Shinn, & McGue, 1982). American special education is not a conspiracy, nor was it originally conceived as a massive means of child control, but the latter is what it has become in many respects (Sigmon, 1985). Only through research that incorporates a foundations of education analysis will this social arrangement be illuminated and will solutions to change it be identified.

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